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ABSTRACT

A followup study of graduates and non-graduates of occupational-technical programs in Virginia Community College System institutions was conducted in order to develop a profile of such students, to ascertain their post-college activities, and to study their attitudes toward their community college experience and current employment. All former students, both full- and part-time, who had been enrolled in a community college occupational-technical curriculum at any time from fall 1966 through fall 1969 were identified and sent a questionnaire designed to provide the necessary data for the study. A total of 11,623 former students were surveyed--3,422 graduates and 8,201 non-graduates. Response rates were 73% and 50% for graduates and non-graduates respectively. Among the findings were: (1) the typical occupational-technical student was a state resident, 23 years old, white, and male; (2) grade-point averages were higher for graduates than non-graduates; (3) almost three-fourths of all respondents were working in full-time jobs related to their community college curricula; (4) salaries of those employed varied considerably by race, sex, and type of graduation credential; and (5) respondents generally rated the quality of their education as superior or good and also indicated satisfaction with their programs of study. (JDS)

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A FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF FORMER OCCUPATIONAL-TECHNICAL STUDENTS AT VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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INTRODUCTION

The Virginia Community College System began operation in 1966. It expanded rapidly in student enrollments, educational programs, staff and facilities. Nine years after the beginning date of operation, the system had grown to 23 community colleges with 32 campuses which enrolled 110,129 different students. A community college was located within commuting distance of every citizen in Virginia.

During the first six years of operation (1966 to 1971), 6,146 students graduated from Virginia Community Colleges. Of these students, 4,783 or 78 percent were graduates of occupational-technical programs. Large numbers of students attended the college but did not complete planned programs of study.

During the 70's larger and larger sums of money will be required for additional educational programs, staff, and facilities for expanding enrollments. Appropriately, the planning for expansion of program operation should be based upon awareness of information about students and potential students, their occupational needs, and also the activities of former students after they leave the community college. Comprehensive and accurate information about former students who were enrolled in occupational-technical programs at Virginia community colleges did not exist before this study was conducted. Some studies of occupational-technical graduates and non-graduates had been conducted at several Virginia community colleges, but the studies were few and it was difficult if not impossible to relate them in any way to the entire system operation.

Follow-up studies are important in establishing public confidence and support among citizens, legislators and executives in government. Hamlin (1967:iii) believes that "Citizen evaluation of public occupational education is probably the most important factor affecting it. On the basis of their evaluations, citizens assign responsibilities for occupational education and provide or withhold funds, personnel, and facilities." Public support is a major focus of accountability. Tyler (1969:125) writes that "Only as we can describe more accurately the results we are obtaining from the curriculum are we in a position to get the most intelligent support for the educational program . . ." Rouche and Boggs (1968:1) refer more directly to financial implications of accountability when they state that "As a consequence of the increased need for funds, efficiency-minded legislators, parents, boards of trustees, and the public are asking whether institutions are getting the maximum value from each dollar expended." O'Connor (1965:52) proclaims that "The existency of junior colleges depends on their ability to convince the people in their communities that they are dynamic, educational institutions capable of serving students well."

Three major purposes were identified for this study: (1) to describe former occupational-technical students at Virginia community colleges, (2) to assess students' postcollege activities and achievements, and (3) to have students evaluate their college experience and current employment. Out of these purposes the following major objectives were defined:

1. To identify selected personal and demographic characteristics of former students in occupational-technical programs.
2. To identify postollege activities of former students.

3. To study the attitudes of former students toward their community college experience and current employment.

4. To study patterns of student retention and withdrawal.

5. To examine differences among graduates and nongraduates and among the several types of graduates in terms of their characteristics, post-college activities, and personal evaluations of college experience and employment.

METHODOLOGY

The population consisted of all former students, both part-time and full-time, enrolled in a Virginia community college occupational curriculum at any time from fall 1966 through fall 1969. Graduates and nongraduates were included. Students known to have changed from occupational-technical to other curricula were included, as were those who changed to occupational-technical programs from other areas. A total of 11,623 former occupational-technical students--3,422 graduates and 8,201 nongraduates--were identified. They had attended 13 colleges during the selected time frame.

Two instruments were developed for the study. The college data form was used to collect names and other data about former students qualifying for inclusion in the study. The student questionnaire was designed to elicit information from former students about their postcollege activities, current employment, and evaluations of their college experiences. Questionnaire items were developed to provide answers to the specific research questions listed previously in this report. Responses to the questionnaire were entered onto computer tapes by optical scanning in order to reduce errors and expenses associated with keypunching.

Two data collection techniques helped minimize time requirements and costs. Mailings were contracted to a private service bureau which used automated mailing procedures; and second, respondents and "undeliverable" subjects were removed from successive mailing lists through the use of a computer program.

Follow-up studies present special problems of satisfactory return rate on mailed questionnaires. Four mailing contacts helped maximize percentage of completed questionnaires.

The initial mailing consisted of a questionnaire and reply envelope. Six days later, a post card was mailed as a reminder to return the questionnaire and to express thanks if it had already been returned. Six days after the post card mailing, a copy of the original questionnaire, a cover letter, and a reply envelope were sent to nonrespondents. The fourth and final mailing consisting of a follow-up letter was sent to an updated list of nonrespondents eight days after the third mailing and 20 days after the initial mailing. This follow-up letter reminded the nonrespondent that his questionnaire had not been received and urged him or her to complete and return it promptly. The cut-off date for using returned questionnaires was set at seven weeks after the first mailing.

Copies of the questionnaire were mailed to 11,623 former students, of which 3,442 were graduates and 8,201 nongraduates. Twelve percent of the questionnaires were undeliverable. From those who were assumed to have received the questionnaire, 61 percent returned usable completed questionnaires--73 percent for graudates and 56 percent for nongraduates--a highly satisfactory rate of return for this type of study.

RESULTS

Highlights of findings from the study will be discussed in three parts. A profile of the occupational-technical student will be described in part one, postcollege activities in part two, and attitudes and perceptions of the occupational-technical student toward their community college experience and postcollege activities in the final section.

A Profile of the Occupational-Technical Student

A large number of different occupational-technical courses are offered by Virginia community colleges. Graduates reported having been enrolled in 99 separate occupational-technical curricula. Slightly more than 80 percent reported having been enrolled in either a business or engineering curriculum.

The occupational-technical student may be described as a Virginia resident, 23 years of age, white, and male. Only 12 percent of the respondents were nonwhite.

The level of formal education obtained by parents of the occupational-technical student was relatively low. Nearly half of the former students' parents had not completed high school. Occupations tended to parallel the levels of education with slightly more than half of the respondents' fathers engaged in blue-collar occupations.

In the area of academic achievement, the grade point averages for graduates was higher than for nongraduates. An important finding from the study indicated that the time required for students to earn awards was longer than the time specified for those awards.

Postcollege Activities

Students in occupational-technical programs have been prepared for full-time employment. Almost three-fourths of the students surveyed were working full-time in jobs related to their community college curricula. Only 12 percent of these students were working outside of the state of Virginia. The salaries of those employed varied considerably by sex, race, and type of graduation credential. Many of those who were working and had not graduated indicated plans for continuing their education in the community college at a later time.

Attitudes of Former Occupational-Technical Students Toward Their Community College Experience and Postcollege Activities

Former students rated the quality of their college preparation superior or good in most areas. They also indicated a satisfaction with their programs of study.

When examining the attitudes of occupational-technical students, it is important to remember that the primary objectives are usually immediate career entry; and, consequently, direct application of their education to a job. During the past two decades, the array of career opportunities in any single field has broadened considerably. If this trend continues students must have the ability and opportunity to examine a wide range of alternatives in career planning.

In rating aspects of their community college experience, students were generally quite positive. Social activities, however, were rated quite low. Since students at community colleges are nonresidential and many of them are part-time, employed, or married, the provision of social activities is somewhat difficult.

Both graduates and nongraduates overwhelmingly endorsed their community college experience. Nine-tenths of both groups indicated that they would recommend the community college to a person planning to enroll in the same program in which they had been enrolled.

Reports Available

Copies of the four reports developed From this study may be obtained from the Division of Research and Planning, Virginia Department of Community Colleges, Post Office Box 1558, Richmond, Virginia 23219.

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